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SUBJECT: The Ambassador's August 18 Meeting with Politburo Member Phan Dzien

Ref: A) Hanoi 1888; B) Hanoi 2063

Summary

1. (SBU) During an August 18 meeting with senior Politburo member Phan Dzien, the Ambassador underlined continued USG support for Vietnam's WTO accession and stressed that, while bilateral progress is important, Vietnam will also need to deal with multilateral issues in Geneva and matters raised by the U.S. Congress in the course of the PNTR vote. Dzien, while urging the United States to rapidly conclude its talks with Vietnam, acknowledged that Vietnam's legislative efforts are running late. On the issue of religious freedom, Dzien repeated Vietnam's policy of allowing religious freedom but acknowledged that local officials do not always follow this policy. On the subject of next year's tenth Party Congress, Dzien said that the Party is examining ways to strengthen Vietnam's market economy, speed up equitization and increase rule of law. While the Party will maintain its leadership role in Vietnam, it is nonetheless examining ways to develop democracy and enhance the role of elective bodies and mass organizations. End Summary.

2. (SBU) The Ambassador met for an hour August 18 with Politburo member Phan Dzien. (Note: Dzien is ranked sixth in the Politburo and is the standing member of the Communist Party (CPV) Central Committee's nine-member Secretariat, ranking just after General Secretary Nong Duc Manh. He is primarily responsible for the day-to-day leadership of the Party. End note.) The Ambassador opened by thanking Dzien for his leading role in promoting U.S.-Vietnam relations. The Prime Minister's visit to the United States was the highlight of the tenth anniversary of the establishment of bilateral relations, and many factors were a part of its success. The PM's reception in the United States reinforced his and others' views about what can be done to expand the bilateral relationship. With Vietnam's hosting APEC in 2006 and President Bush scheduled to attend, the current momentum of the relationship will be kept up into next year, the Ambassador said.

WTO Accession

3. (SBU) To allow the bilateral relationship to grow as the United States would like, it is important for Vietnam to be strong and prosperous, the Ambassador continued. The next logical step in ensuring this is Vietnam's WTO accession, which the United States continues to support. During the President's meeting with Prime Minister Khai, he made clear that a political decision had been made to support Vietnam's WTO aspirations. What remain are technical matters. As the Ambassador recently noted to Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan, much is being done behind the scenes to prepare for the next round of bilateral WTO negotiations (Ref A). We recognize that some in Vietnam are concerned that we have thus far been unable to conclude our talks. The fact of the matter is the bilateral negotiations are probably the easiest of the three elements necessary to Vietnam's accession.

4. (SBU) In addition to the bilateral negotiations, there are multilateral discussions in Geneva through the Working Party, the Ambassador explained. The key here is Vietnam's creation of the proper legal framework for WTO entry, which we recognize the National Assembly and the GVN have been working on for the past year. However, the issue of timing remains because the National Assembly has to pass laws that the Working Group will not see until later this year.

5. (SBU) The third element is Congress's Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) vote for Vietnam. This will involve a close review of the Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) and the attitude of U.S. business towards Vietnam, which we have found to be strongly supportive. The PNTR vote will also be an opportunity for Members of Congress with interests in Vietnam and in certain aspects of the bilateral relationship to ask for clarifications and express their opinions. These matters may not have anything to do with trade. However, we have to be prepared to deal with these issues, which will

likely be related to areas in which our two countries have differences, such as human rights, religious freedom and the treatment of ethnic minorities, the Ambassador said.
Religious Freedom: Party Can Play a Role

16. (SBU) The USG recognizes fully the progress that Vietnam has made in recent years in dealing with these matters. The Party and GVN deserve credit for improving Vietnam's standard of living, expanding the space available for religious believers and creating social and economic opportunities for ethnic minorities. However, problems remain, and it is important that we manage problem areas through continued dialogue and exchanges of information. One example of an area of difficulty is that some local officials either do not understand or choose to ignore the GVN's clearly articulated new policy on religious freedom. Given the breadth of its organization across Vietnam, the Party can play a leading role in ensuring that officials obey the letter and spirit of Vietnam's laws and Constitution, the Ambassador suggested.

Ho Chi Minh Desired Expanded Relations

17. (SBU) Vietnam attaches great importance to its relationship with the United States and hopes that bilateral relations proceed accordingly, Dzien said. During a recent visit to Ho Chi Minh's redoubt in Tuyen Quang Province in the months before his return to Hanoi in 1945, Dzien was able to tour a small airfield that U.S. planes used to provide support to Ho and his comrades. A U.S. plane is still on display, a symbol of Ho Chi Minh's desire to expand relations with the United States, Dzien explained.

Vietnam Running Late

18. (SBU) On the ongoing bilateral WTO negotiations, Dzien expressed his hope that the talks would soon conclude, providing impetus to the conclusion of Vietnam's talks with other nations. As for the National Assembly's legislative work, "to be frank, we are worried," Dzien said. Vietnam realizes that it is running late, but will spare no effort to complete the tasks at hand by the end of the year. On the PNTR vote in the U.S. Congress, Vietnam understands it has to create favorable conditions for the vote.

Local Officials Do Not Always Follow Policy

19. (SBU) It is true that local officials do not always follow Government policy, Dzien continued. Religion has played a complex role in Vietnam's wars. In each religion, there have been supporters of the revolution and supporters of the former southern regime, and this latter opposition has sometimes led to bloody conflict. It is by no means easy to eliminate this discord. That said, it is Vietnam's policy to make every effort to ensure freedom of religion and unite all religions to serve the cause of national construction. Furthermore, religious activities must be within the framework of Vietnam's laws. In the event that there are specific cases of interest, Vietnam will take note of others' concerns, Dzien said.

Tackling Tough Issues

10. (SBU) It seems clear that Ho Chi Minh saw the possibility for bilateral relations before others saw it, but our missed opportunities in the past make it all the more important not to miss opportunities now, the Ambassador observed. Forty years ago it would have been difficult to predict where we are today and that the relationship would develop as it has. Our shared history makes our relations stronger and creates more possibilities. Although we still have tough issues to tackle, we are making progress. For example, a DOD team just held a workshop on decontaminating dioxin sites, which proved to be an opportunity for positive exchanges between military experts from both countries. Additionally, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund is using money from the U.S. Congress to clear unexploded ordnance and help those whose lives have been badly affected by UXO. Relations between Viet Kieu and Vietnam are also sensitive, and the Ambassador expressed his desire to help create better communication and understanding between the two. The GVN has an active policy to increase dialogue, but more can be done to help reconcile Viet Kieu to the Vietnam of today, the Ambassador noted.

11. (SBU) On the WTO, the USG applauds Vietnam's steadfast efforts to do all that is possible to enter the WTO, preferably by the end of 2005. However, fixating on Hong Kong in December may cause the process to be too rushed. What is most important is for Vietnam to join the WTO fully prepared and with the right set of laws and bilateral agreements, the Ambassador said.

12. (SBU) The Ambassador turned to the subject of next year's tenth Party Congress, the foci of which reportedly will be an evaluation of twenty years of Vietnam's "doi moi" (renovation) policy and a look ahead to 2020 and Vietnam's goal of being a modern nation. There has also been some talk that the Party Congress will address the issue of political doi moi (Ref B). Responding, Dzien said that the CPV is actively preparing for the Congress. In terms of economic reform, doi moi will be implemented in a more broad-based manner to fully put in place a market economy with socialist orientation. Although Vietnam has made efforts to introduce a market economy, it is not yet a full-fledged market economy with the proper laws and institutions in place. This is something the Party Congress will address, Dzien explained.

13. (SBU) In the State sector, Vietnam must speed up equitization, abolish monopolies and remove the mechanism of line ministries having oversight over enterprises, Dzien continued. Vietnam needs a policy of developing a multi-sector economy while encouraging the development of the private sector. In the future, Vietnam will increase assistance to the private sector to maximize its capacity to meet demand. Vietnam must also work to speed up its international integration, Dzien added.

14. (SBU) The meaning of "socialist orientation" is that Vietnam's economic development must be linked to its cultural and social development. For example, Vietnam must try to ensure social equality for everyone, with a special emphasis placed on poverty reduction, particularly in areas heavily populated by ethnic minorities, Dzien emphasized.

15. (SBU) Political reform is another issue that is being debated. The leading role of the Communist Party will continue, but the Party will try to find a way to better ensure democracy, including religious freedom. Vietnam must ensure national unity among people of all social strata, religions and ethnic backgrounds. Vietnam will also strive to give Viet Kieu opportunities to learn about the Vietnam of today and create opportunities for them to contribute to Vietnam's development. There must also be efforts to strengthen rule of law, and, on that basis, the Party must consider reforming its "leadership methods." There is also a discussion about enhancing the role of elective bodies and mass organizations to make them more effective, Dzien explained.

16. (SBU) Finding a balance between the goal of maintaining the CPV as the leading political force and strengthening democracy is an admirable, but difficult, goal, the Ambassador said. Clearly, increasing rule of law versus rule of man is vital for Vietnam's economic and overall success. Our two systems are different, particularly in terms of politics and governing. However, in the spirit of mutual respect, the USG may have ideas we can share as Vietnam moves forward with its plans, the Ambassador offered. Dzien concluded by asking for the USG's help in ensuring the success of APEC 2006 and the visit by the President.

17. (SBU) As he walked the Ambassador out, Dzien returned to Ho Chi Minh's interest in democracy. Just days before proclaiming Vietnam's independence in September 1945, Ho asked his U.S. military "advisors" to obtain a copy of the U.S. Declaration of Independence from the headquarters in Kunming, China. The request went unanswered. Doing research is a lot easier in the internet age, the Ambassador joked.

18. (SBU) Comment: A youthful-looking 67-year old, Dzien was relaxed and well briefed, particularly on the details of Vietnam's WTO efforts. Although not a regular USG interlocutor -- the last senior USG official to see him was Ambassador Burghardt, for his farewell call -- Dzien has reportedly played a behind-the-scenes role in helping to strengthen bilateral ties. Significantly, Dzien was on tap to travel to the United States to advance the Prime Minister's visit (originally proposed for last year), the delay of which ultimately prevented Dzien from going. End Comment.

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